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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 000614

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SUBJECT: PAKISTAN ELECTIONS: MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

REF: ISLAMABAD 549

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, for reasons 1.4 (b)(d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Regardless of who "wins" the February 18 elections in Pakistan, the challenge will be managing expectations of the Pakistani public, the political parties and the international community. Despite assumptions that Bhutto's assassinaton will propel her party to a big victory, we do not believe any one party will win a majority in the National Assembly. Musharraf's party is well organized and has a track record of providing services that typically translate into votes on election day. With Nawaz Sharif back from exile, his party expects to increase its vote count. Concerns about security, lackluster voter registration and an intra-party leadership struggle may undercut voter turnout and reduce the level of the "sympathy surge" for Bhutto's party.

¶2. (C) Especially if the vote is close, the formation of a coalition government may take weeks or months. If voter expectations are dashed, post-election violence in this period of political uncertainty is a possibility. Particularly in the days immediately following the election, the USG should continue to encourage patience and calm as final results are tabulated and the process of forming a government begins. See septel for basic election procedures. End summary.

¶3. (C) There is a widespread assumption in Pakistan that the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) will ride a wave of sympathy votes to a big win in the February 18 parliamentary elections. The latest International Republican Institute poll shows that President Musharraf's job approval rating has dropped to 15%, while public support for the PPP is as high as 50% across the country, and there is solid support for Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N). But these numbers do not tell the whole story.

Candidate Loyalty

¶4. (C) Pakistani elections historically are decided in the Punjab, which provides 183 of 342 votes in the National Assembly. Particularly in rural Punjab, voters tend to support individual candidates and those who deliver services, regardless of party affiliation. Under Chief Minister Pervaiz Elahi, Musharraf's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) has over the past five years provided an array of education and agricultural development benefits which typically translate

into votes on election day. The PML has fielded strong candidates in the Punjab, and the party has all the advantages of an incumbent. Although we are seeing less interference by the intelligence agencies than was apparent in 2002, the opposition continues to claim that through the agencies and government-appointed mayors the PML is "rigging" the election in its favor. In Balochistan, the boycott of the Baloch parties means PML could pick up additional seats there. PML expects to retain seats in the Northwest Frontier Province but to lose badly in Sindh.

15. (C) The PPP expects to sweep Sindh except in Karachi where it will share votes with the dominant Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) party. In the Northwest Frontier Province, the boycott of Qazi Hussain's Jamaat-e-Islami party has increased chances for PPP and the Pashtun-based Awami National Party to pick up seats. But PPP candidates in key districts of the southern Punjab are squabbling (septel). PPP Co-Chairman Asif Zardari's trial balloon of nominating himself as the PPP's candidate for Prime Minister (reftel) was quickly shot down (for now). However, Zardari's past history of corruption has alienated even some PPP supporters. Party leaders worry that this leadership struggle will weaken the party's chances to take advantage of a sympathy vote over Benazir Bhutto's death.

16. (C) Nawaz Sharif's PML-N party stands to increase its 17 member standing in the last Parliament, but his power base has to date been limited to urban centers like the Punjab capital of Lahore. The PML-N party structure deteriorated during Nawaz's eight years of exile, both Nawaz and his brother Shahbaz have been declared ineligible to run, and the party overall has fielded a limited slate of candidates.

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Still, there is support across Pakistan for Nawaz's anti-Musharraf campaign.

Low Turnout/Registration, Boycotts

16. (C) According to IFES, turnout in the 2002 parliamentary elections was only 30%. This year, the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, a growing insurgency in the tribal areas, and a dramatic increase in suicide bombings have dampened political campaigning (septel), increased public security concerns, and may significantly reduce voter turnout. The Election Commission has already expressed concern about the possibility that turnout could drop below 2002 levels. A low voter turnout is expected to benefit the PML.

17. (C) A badly managed Election Commission registration survey and voter apathy produced a draft 2007 voter list that, while cleaner than ever before, was short millions of potential voters. A Supreme Court decision forced the Election Commission to hastily add 30 million names to the voter list, but they were instructed to combine the credible 2007 list with a flawed 2002 voter list that many believe favored a PML victory. It may be that the PPP's expected surge will be undercut simply because their voters are not adequately registered.

18. (C) Several of Pakistan's smaller parties are boycotting the election. These include the Qazi Hussain's Jamaat-e-Islami, Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf, and some of the regional/ethnic parties (Pukhtunkhwa Milli Awami, Baloch National and Jahmoori Watan). Combined, they represented less than 30 seats in the last National Assembly, but their boycott campaign continues to receive media coverage. The All Parties Democratic Movement is lobbying daily to discourage voter participation.

Violence?

19. (C) Many analysts are warning that a surprise PML win

would send people into the streets, especially in Bhutto's home province of Sindh. The IRI poll indicated that 55% of those surveyed would demonstrate if the PPP lost the election. The Army is planning to deploy to key polling places, including in Sindh, that are deemed "sensitive" by the Election Commission. A PML win would upset civil society, which in all likelihood would take to the streets. But the degree to which the parties would follow remains to be seen. The situation will depend on the vote count and Zardari's ability to control the PPP street reaction. The PPP is the only party capable of putting a significant number of people on the streets.

¶10. (C) A close race among PML, PPP and PML-N may mitigate a public backlash as all the parties move to negotiations over government formation and maneuvering for ministerial appointments. In Sindh, the chances of the PPP controlling the provincial government are considered high, and this could reduce public outcry over a possible second-place showing at the national level. Beyond Sindh, a lack of concentrated areas of PPP support would lessen chances of violence. Politically, both PPP and PML-N leaders and supporters may avoid violence because they are anxious to return to power and have publicly been touting the benefits of a "national unity" government. PPP and PML leaders have indicated they are ready to discuss terms of a potential power-sharing arrangement.

¶11. (C) Reports of the international observers could play into the level of public reaction as well. If the PML wins, the opposition will seize on any observer reports of voting irregularities. If the PPP wins, however, we expect the level of interest in documenting electoral fraud will drop dramatically.

¶12. (C) Comment: We do not expect the Election Commission to report final unofficial results until February 20. Despite expectations of a big PPP win, there could be a close vote among the major parties leading to protracted negotiations on forming a new government. The challenge will be to manage expectations. Particularly in the days immediately following the election, the USG should continue to encourage patience

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and calm as final results are tabulated and the process of forming a government begins.

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